

Shifting Powers in Russia's Employment Relations? Alternative Trade Unions Challenging Transnational Automotive Companies

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Abstract

Since 2000, the increasing number of transnational companies (TNC) in Russia's booming regions has given rise to the growth of an alternative union movement. Foreign automobile firms in particular are under fire for undermining workers' rights. In Kaluga region, located southwest of Moscow, plant organizations of the new independent union MPRA (Interregional Trade Union Worker's Association) successfully struggled to receive formal recognition as negotiating unions by utilizing the structural power of the workers. In this way, the MPRA achieved considerable gains on plant level in two TNCs in the automotive industry. However, its organizational prospects for lasting consolidation have been wrought with difficulties. The unions' successes are ostensibly the result of utilization of workers' structural power to bargain at the workplace, resulting mainly from the economic and local circumstances foreign firms face. Despite these gains, both plant unions suffered notable losses of membership in the period after they were achieved and have had difficulties in sustaining organizational power. The unions' focus solely on the individual workplace, as well as the absence of employers' associations, prevents negotiations for sectoral or regional agreements, further impairing union's organizational power. On an institutional level, those new unions' chances of overcoming ossified institutions of employment relations and a punitive state are minimal. Moreover, societal power in Russia is sorely underdeveloped; indicating that a substantial shift in power balance of established employment relations is not yet in sight.

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Sarah Hinz

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